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## Writing for the Ear: Strengthening Oral Style in Manuscript Speeches

*Courses: Speechwriting, Public Speaking (Basic or Advanced), Business and Professional Communication*

*Objective: To strengthen the conversational quality of manuscript speeches*

### Rationale

Public speaking texts typically advise speakers to avoid using a manuscript. As O'Hair, Stewart, and Rubenstein (2010) have noted, speaking from a manuscript can limit eye contact, reduce expressiveness, and bore listeners. Lucas (2010) concurs, noting that manuscript speakers often "come across as *reading* to their listeners, rather than *talking* with them" (p. 245). The ideal, rather, is to sound conversational. In the familiar formulation of Winans (1938), "there is no good speaking without this conversational quality" (p. 21). Conversational style, according to Jamieson (1988), is a hallmark of modern public speaking, epitomized by the fireside chats of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the intimate sounding speeches of Ronald Reagan. Conversational style is inclusive, suggesting that a speaker is "'of the people,' united in understanding, values, and purpose" (Branham & Pearce, 1996, p. 245). If a speaker is tied to an artificial sounding manuscript, the potential for connecting with listeners is jeopardized.

Speakers can achieve the conversational ideal by speaking extemporaneously, but this form of delivery is not always an option. As Zarefsky (2011) has pointed out, formal or high-stakes speeches, such as presidential addresses, speeches of business and community leaders, and some presentations at academic conferences, demand the precision of a manuscript. In such situations, practice is essential, but practice alone is not enough. If a manuscript is written like an essay—to be read rather than heard—speakers will likely still sound like they are reading, no matter how fluent and expressive the delivery. For scripted speeches to sound conversational, they must be written for the ear, not the eye.

This article describes an oral style assignment, "the conversational speech," which facilitates writing for the ear. The assignment was developed for an upper-level course in speechwriting, where producing manuscripts is the norm rather than the exception. Professional speechwriters, including Noonan (1991), Perlman (1998), and Lehrman (2010), speak in unison about the need to master oral style; consequently, developing this skill is a key objective in speechwriting courses. The conversational speech assignment, which requires students to transform one of their essays or research papers into a 7-8 minute speech, helps to accomplish this goal. Although originally developed for a speechwriting class, the assignment can easily be adapted to other contexts, including public speaking classes and professional communication courses and workshops.

### **The Activity**

Mastering oral style is a foundational speechwriting skill; hence, the conversational speech assignment works best if scheduled early in the course. Students should be given the following assignment description:

Prepare a typed manuscript for a 7-8 minute speech (roughly 3-4 double-spaced pages) based on a research paper or essay that you wrote recently for another class (to be submitted with the speech manuscript). Your speech manuscript should reflect all of the basic principles of public speaking and should feature, in particular, strong oral style. Your speech should not sound like a research paper when read aloud; rather, it should sound natural and conversational.

The "basic principles" mentioned in the assignment refer to principles covered in the basic public speaking course, which at our university is a prerequisite for speechwriting. Preparation for the conversational speech thus includes a review of these principles (e.g., purpose, audience, invention, arrangement, etc.), after which the instructional focus shifts to oral style. The preparatory activities for the assignment include readings and class discussion, analysis of one or more models, and an in-class translation exercise. In my course, I presented these activities in two class periods (75 minutes each) with the speeches due in the following class, but the activities can be expanded or contracted as needed.

### **Readings and Class Discussion**

Before students can write in oral style, they need to understand its features. The differences between oral and written style are well documented in various sources, but books on speechwriting and broadcast journalism are particularly useful, not only because oral style is critical in these contexts, but also because the authors themselves are excellent models. For my class, students read two chapters on effective language use from our primary textbook, Lehrman's (2010) *The Political Speechwriter's Companion*, and one chapter from Boyd's (1994) *Broadcast Journalism*. When discussing these readings in class, instructors should ask students to identify the features of oral style and invite them to read selected examples aloud to emphasize the quality being discussed. The goal is to create a master checklist of qualities of oral style. Although advice on oral style is fairly consistent from reading to reading, authors often have different points of emphasis and identify different features. Lehrman, for instance, recommends short words, concrete words, active verbs, colloquial language, figures of speech, repetition, and parallelism as ways of making language clear and memorable. Boyd reinforces many of these points but puts them a bit differently, cautioning readers, for example, against "sea serpents," sentences that feature a "tangle of subsidiary clauses" (p. 43). Boyd also highlights the importance of familiar words and contractions and warns against jarring sounds and tongue twisters. As a result of the readings and discussion, should understand that oral language is shorter, simpler, more repetitious, and more rhythmic than written language.

## **Analysis of Models**

To reinforce the readings, instructors should show students one or more model speeches that demonstrate strong oral style. If time permits, showing an example of a written-sounding speech would provide a valuable contrast. For this activity, students should have access to a list of features of oral style, and they should be instructed to use that list to evaluate the model speaker. One good source of conversational-sounding speeches is the TED website ([www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com)), which contains hundreds of speeches on a variety of topics, given by leaders in diverse fields. In my class, students watched a speech on spaghetti sauce presented by *Tipping Point* author Malcolm Gladwell. Students were able to identify numerous specific examples of strong oral style in Gladwell's speech, and they spotted additional features for the checklist, including the use of signposts, frequent use of the second person ("you"), short, repetitious, punchy statements, and reported dialogue.

## **Translation Exercise**

After discussing the video example, students can practice translating written style into oral style. Instructors should provide short essay-like passages to students, then direct students to rewrite in oral style. For this exercise, paragraphs from scholarly essays work well, as do bureaucratic-sounding letters or memos. Textbooks, too, can be a good source of material. After five or ten minutes, students should read their translations aloud; instructors will likely have opportunities to suggest ways to make the style even more oral (e.g., "Would you really say, 'I received a phone call from my mother?' How about, 'I got a call from my mom.'") This small-scale translation exercise gives students an opportunity to practice what the conversational speech assignment demands.

## **The Conversational Speech: Before and After Readings**

On the day the conversational speech is due, students should have both their original essay and their conversational speech in class. If time permits, instructors can ask students to read a paragraph from their original essay, then present the conversational speech. In my class, six students volunteered; after each speech, students discussed the differences between the "before" and "after" versions of the material, thereby reinforcing the principles of oral style.

## **Debriefing**

The learning that students demonstrate in this assignment is encouraging. Although some students make more noticeable changes in their assignments, all make progress. In my speechwriting class, the average grade for submitted assignments was 83% (see appendix for an evaluation form). The following "before" and "after" excerpts from one of my students illustrate the sort of transformation instructors can expect.

Before (essay version):

The receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature by Anatole France in 1921 bore heavy rhetorical implications for a world still recovering from the Great War, and his novel *Thaïs* generously demonstrates a move in the "ideal direction" as required by Alfred Nobel in his will (Nobel). A classical education and a notable lack of fame were characteristic of France and his writing, and both were aspects that the Nobel selection committee, in their presentation speech, credited to his selection of the Nobel Prize in Literature (Karlfeldt). (Wohletz, 2010b)

After (conversational speech):

The year was 1921. The man was an author and librarian who won one of the most prestigious awards in the world: The Nobel Prize in Literature. His name was Anatole France. And his story, along with the story of how he was chosen to receive this prize, is historically significant. It's significant because it lets us glimpse into the story of the Great War, and it's significant because it teaches us about a prize that captures a truly global audience. (Wohletz, 2010a)

The conversational excerpt differs from the essay version in several ways, featuring shorter sentences, contractions, personal pronouns, and repetition. The passage could be a bit more concise, but overall, the student is moving in a very promising direction.

### Appraisal

The conversational speech assignment lays a valuable foundation for future assignments in speechwriting. Students catch on fairly quickly to shorter sentences, repetition, and personal language. Perhaps not surprisingly, certain features of written style are harder to eradicate, including contraction-free language and dependent clauses. To write for the ear, students must at times disregard what they have learned about writing essays, and those habits can be hard to break. The activities described here help to jump start that process.

Although the conversational assignment is generally very effective, it presents a challenge with two types of students: those who have not written an essay or research paper, and those whose writing style in the original paper—be it a formal essay or speech outline or newspaper editorial—is already very conversational. Students who have not written an essay could consider other documents they have written, such as an annotated bibliography, or they could transform another writer's essay or research paper. For students whose writing is already oral, instructors should review the student's original material to see if it would be suitable for the assignment. If not, the student can transform someone else's material. To ensure good choices initially, instructors might provide students with examples of appropriate original material when describing the assignment, then approve selections shortly thereafter.

As noted previously, these oral style exercises can be modified easily for other contexts. For example, I have included an oral style checklist, prepared in advance, along with a mini-translation exercise in speaking workshops. I have also incorporated scaled-down versions of these exercises in the basic course in public speaking. Oral composition is no substitute for extemporaneous delivery in this context, of course, but there are instances in which more carefully scripted wording is helpful. Students sometimes write out their introductions and conclusions in full, for example, or create manuscripts for

special occasion speeches. In public speaking classes, instructors can draw special attention to the features of oral style, which are typically discussed in the textbook chapter on language, then ask students to read aloud from either a preparation outline in the text or an introduction or conclusion. Often, these examples are more written than oral, which makes them perfect for mini-translation activities. Reading the "written" examples aloud also vividly underscores the importance of making speeches sound like speeches, not essays, whether by speaking extemporaneously or writing for the ear.

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## Appendix

### Conversational Speech Evaluation Form

- 14-15 Excellent. All passages in this manuscript sound very natural and not at all scripted. The style is engaging, memorable, and audience-centered. Material is well chosen and well-organized, and the length is perfect (or close to it).
- 12-13 Good. All (or almost all) passages sound oral rather than written. Style may not be quite as engaging or polished as the "A" manuscript, but it's noticeably more oral than the written version. Speech fundamentals are solid.
- 10-11 Satisfactory. Some principles of oral style evident, but execution is inconsistent. Speech fundamentals are basically in place, although the manuscript may have problems here and there.
- 8-9 Substandard. Style sounds fairly scripted; may be less effective than the original due to problems with clarity and correctness. Problems with speech fundamentals.
- 0-7 Failing. Assignment not completed according to requirements (e.g., no changes made in wording; original material not submitted or of a sort different from that specified in the assignment).